Denali

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska

The Art of Watching

Kathleen Dean Moore
Writer-in-Residence 2013

Kathleen Dean Moore is a nature writer and environmental philosopher, best known for books set on the edge of water – *Riverwalking*, *Holdfast*, *Pine Island Paradox*, and *Wild Comfort*. In new work, she turns to the moral urgency of climate action: *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*; "If Your House is on Fire," SUN magazine; and other pieces. Moore is Distinguished Professor emerita at Oregon State University, co-founder and Senior Fellow of the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word, and a member of the Board of Directors of *Orion* magazine. She travels widely to speak about ethics and climate change. At the edge of the East Fork of the Toklat River in Denali, Moore thought and wrote about change.

Artist-in-Residence Program
Selected competitively through an open call for entries each year, artists spend ten days in Denali. From their experiences, they each create art pieces to donate to the park collection. Opinions expressed may not be shared by the National Park Service.

Learn more at
www.nps.gov/dena/historyculture/arts-program.htm

Denali National Park and Preserve
PO Box 9
Denali Park, Alaska 99755
907 683-2294

The Rules of Rivers

At midnight on the Toklat River in the Alaska Range, the thermometer recorded 93 degrees. The sun, dragging anchor in the northwest sky, fired rounds of heat against the cabin. I was lying naked on the bunk, slapping mosquitos. Next to the wall, my husband lay completely covered by a white sheet, as still and dismayed as a corpse. He would rather be hot than bitten, and I would rather be bitten than hot.

I had come to the Toklat River to think about global warming, and it wasn't going well. The week's heat was breaking all-time records, drawing a new spike on the graph of jaggedly rising temperatures in Alaska. The average day is now four degrees warmer than just a few decades ago, and seven degrees warmer in winter. The Arctic is heating twice as fast as the rest of the world.

Furious and despairing, I had no chance of falling asleep that night. So I pulled on clothes and walked to the bank of the river.

The Toklat is a shallow river that braids across a good half mile of gravel beds, dried stream courses and deep-dug channels. Sloshing with meltwater, it clatters along through islands and willow thickets. Banging rocks on cobblestones, surging into confused swells, the grey currents looked unpredictable and chaotic. But there were patterns.

A hydrologist once explained the rules of rivers to me as we walked a river-path. The processes of a river are manifestations of energy, he said. A fast, high-energy river will carry particles – the faster the river, the bigger the particle. But when it loses energy and slows, the river drops what it carries. So anything that slows a river can make a new landscape. It could be a stick lodged against a stone or the ribcage of a calf moose drowned at high water. Where the water piles against the obstacle, it drops its load, and an island begins to form. The island – in fact, any deposition -- reshapes the current. As water curls around the obstacle, the current's own force turns it upstream. Around one small change, the energy reorganizes itself entirely.

And here's the point: No one pattern continues indefinitely; it always gives way to another. When there are so many obstacles and islands that a channel can no longer carry all its water and sediment, it crosses a stability threshold and the

current carves a new direction. The change is usually sudden, often dramatic, the hydrologist said, a process called an 'avulsion.'

On the Toklat that night, the physics of the river played out right in front of me. A chunk of dirt and roots toppled from the bank upstream, tumbled past me, and jammed against a mid-river stone. The current, dividing itself around the rootball, wrinkled sideways and turned upstream. It curled into pocket-eddies behind the roots. Even as I watched, the pockets filled with gravel and sand. A willow could grow there, and its roots could divide and slow the river further, gathering more gravel, creating a place where new life could take root.

I shoved a rock into the river. The sudden curl of current made me grin. Yes, we are caught up in a river rushing toward a hot, stormy, and dangerous planet. The river is powered by huge amounts of money invested in mistakes that are dug into the very structure of the land, a tangled braid of fearful politicians, preoccupied consumers, reckless corporations, and bewildered children – everyone, in some odd way, feeling helpless. Of course, we despair. How will we ever dam this flood?

But we don't have to stop the river. Our work and the work of every person who loves this world – this one – is to make one small deflection in complacency, a small obstruction to profits, a blockage to business-as-usual, then another, and another, to change the energy of the flood. As it swirls around these snags and subversions, the current will slow, lose power, eddy in new directions, and create new systems and structures that change its course forever. On these small islands, new ideas will grow, creating thickets of living things and life-ways we haven't yet imagined. Those disruptions can turn destructive energy into a new dynamic that finally reverses the forces that would wreck the world.

This is the work of creative disruption. This is the work of radical imagination. This is the work of witness. This is the steadfast, conscientious refusal to let a hell-bent economy force us to row its boat. This is much better than stewing in the night.

At the East Fork Cabin, All is Well

The Art of Watching
Kathleen Dean Moore

"All is well at the East Fork Cabin," I shout at the satellite phone. Every day, at 7 am and 7 pm, I am supposed to call in to the communication center. If I don't, they'll send a ranger over to make sure we haven't been routed by bears or nudged by a bus off Polychrome Pass.

"I read you," Randy the dispatcher shouts back. "All is well at the East Fork Cabin. Talk to you tonight."

"No really," I want to tell him, "Really, all is really well." I want to tell him that in this early morning air, each willow catkin glistens with frost, and the snowdrifts over the creek bed are hard and shining. Last night's bell chorus of waterdrops from the roof of the snow bridge is quiet now – just a pock here and a pock there in the wet arch of darkness. Papery ice sheets grew across the shallows overnight, drawing silver topographic maps, rivers and ridges radiating from each pebble. Under the bank, ice crystals have raised crenelated towers and turrets, glass cathedrals with mud roofs. And on the bank, ice fills the perfect pawprint of a wolf.

I don't want to keep Randy. I know a satellite phone is pay-per-minute and I have to make my prepaid 43 minutes last ten days, and he's breaking up anyway. And maybe emergency calls are coming in, but I want to tell him how good it is that there is a time in the early morning when the river is not hurrying. It has not taken up its to-do list, which is mostly the slow demolition of mountains. First it will attend to the smaller work of tuning up the river, each riffle and stone, preparing to sing the praise-song to the morning.

I take my seat on the bench by the river in a grove of aspen trees. Sometimes, a morning is so quiet that you can hear the breath of quiet itself, the slow in and out that shimmers in new leaves. Leaves tick. They tick.

Now as the silted current sifts over stones, it rustles like an orchestra getting ready to play. Flutists puff air through the narrow tubes of their flutes to warm silver and brass. There it is – the soft brush hush as violinists lean forward to adjust their scores and singers find the page. That little tap tap: a chickadee opens a seed and a percussionist tunes the tympani. Softly, a Swainson's thrush whistles up the scale.

Do you know the sound when all the members of a choir stand, the rustle of their rising? That's what the river sounds like, every pebble pushing up its wave. The road grader on the bridge beeps its backup warning. There is a sudden silence. Everything is poised to begin. The morning draws in its breath. Here now is the first flooding chord of water over pebble and cobble and boulder, and the basso profundo of the first bus downshifting on the grade over the pass. A ptarmigan cackles. A flock of siskins whistles. Silt rasps against rocks, and cobbles roll. So indistinct, but so musical, so full, the sounds I hear could be the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and orchestra carried on the wind from yesterday, or from a hundred miles away.

Icy catkins are candles in this early light. Their flames flicker. Yellow light flows through new poplar leaves. The northern anemones are still sleeping, or maybe they are praying, standing up with their heads bent over, the petals closed across their faces. When I passed them last evening, their heads were thrown back like tenors, full open to the sun. But now, the cells on one side of their stems have lost their timbre, and their heads nod.

And Randy, I want to tell you this, that when my father was dying, he listened over and over to the chords of the old hymn that ends with a great upwelling of voices and joyous trumpets, All is well. All is well. That's the refrain he listened to, reaching out his hand to press 'replay.' All is well.

I didn't understand that then. How can a person who feels his breath failing, feel as well the gratitude and reassurance that flow over him like water and fill him like music? But maybe I am beginning to understand it now, because I've listened to a river carry a mountain to the sea. I've seen how light changes to darkness and back again, and ice to mud. The snow will melt, the white anemones will fade back into the earth, the wolves will pass into the stars, our fathers will be folded back into soil. But even when all lives are gone, there will still be the music of water on stone, and the faraway singing of the wind.

On the Bus, Watching

The Art of Watching
Kathleen Dean Moore

> *The Denali Park Road parallels the Alaska Range and travels through low valleys and high mountain passes. . . . Along its route, beautiful landscapes can be seen at every turn . . . Wildlife can often be seen, too, . . . wild animals roaming an unfenced land. . . . We encourage all visitors to take some kind of bus trip while in Denali, as it is a great way to experience the park and build lasting memories.*
>
> – www.nps.gov/dena

"Watch carefully," the bus driver says. "There are fifty-one pairs of eyes on this bus, so collectively we have a greater chance of seeing things than any of us alone." All eyes are turned to the windows as the bus churns past the subalpine fens where moose might stand knee-deep in buttercups. All eyes are turned to the windows in the heather highlands, where bears might dig roots or caribou might look up from their grazing. Everyone is watching.

Watching. From the Old English word, waeccan, which means "to be awake." Awake to the world outside the window, awake to the tangled plant and animal lives in the alpine's short summer, awake to the mountain light through storms. Watching is more than paying attention. For the passengers, there is glad anticipation in the watching, an eagerness to see something they have seen only in books, something they have travelled halfway around the world to see, something they silently yearn for – a glimpse of a place that is functional and whole and true to itself.

The bus driver slows and stops. "Wolf!" he says. "To the right, there, in the gully at the edge of the road." Everyone – the German women, the three children from Albuquerque, the Japanese lovers in the backseat, the white-haired couples from the cruise ships – all press to the right, searching for the wolf, but searching also for a glimpse of what is wild and astonishing, searching for assurance that there is still untamed beauty and wildness in the reeling world.

"Do you see it?"

"There, half hidden by the bush." A child sees him first.
"It's sort of grey."

Then they all see him. The wolf bites at his glorious tail, then sits on his haunches and gazes past the hanging-bell meadow to the rocky moraine.

There is an art to watching. Humans are born watchful, squirting wide-eyed into the world. Nothing new escapes a child's eyes. But if, somehow along the way toward adulthood, the child starts to take the world for granted – literally that, as a given – then the great, wild world can fade from her vision, nothing more than the background of the set on which she plays out her life. At that point, it is something very much worth doing, to come to a place entirely new and practice the art of watching.

The Art of Watching

Kathleen Dean Moore

THE ART OF WATCHING

1. Watch for shadows.

Animals have evolved to hide in the tapestry of their colors, so it may not be the animals themselves, but their shadows, that you see. A gray wolf can disappear in gray boulders, but she cannot hide the shadow loping upside-down along the gulch beside her. Watch for the black shadow of a golden eagle drawing a topographic line across valleys and moraines, the shadow of a caribou's neck stretched by evening sun over tundra, the trapezoidal shadow of a lynx that is himself invisible on the road, fish-shapes rippling on sand.

2. Watch for reflections.

If there are swallows swooping over the pond, you will see their reflections first. It will take some searching to find the birds themselves, hidden as they are against the sweeping limbs of spruce. If there is a beaver, you will first see its wake raising a ripple on the reflected sky.

3. Watch with your eyes shaded from the sun.

There are some things in this world that are perfectly matched to their purposes, as the baseball cap is perfectly matched to the fly ball. Up, up, you follow the arc of the ball while the crowd cheers. In Denali, the curl of the cap keeps the sun from your eyes, as up and up you follow the mounds of mountain-avens into the fellfields, across the talus, to the ice-sharp ridges, to the last green cliff, to the highest pinnacle of rock, and there they are, five white specks, Dall sheep grazing slowly through the rustling applause of the endless wind.

4. Watch especially for things that have no name.

There is no word for the little nests of leaves and mud that mark the flood line in riparian trees. Or the broken-heart shape of moose tracks in mud. Or the clapping dance of a child chasing a mosquito. There is no name for the moment on a summer night when dusk becomes indistinguishable from dawn, that blending of lavender into rose. There is no name for the unity of arctic ground squirrel and red fox. Words, the relentless nouns of the English language, divide the world into sharp-edged and familiar things. If there were no words at all, would it be easier to understand that all things blend without boundaries into one beautiful whole – for which there is no name?

5. Watch with your eyes closed.

While your eyes are resting, the other senses come to life. With your eyes closed as you doze after lunch, you can smell a passing grizzly – the stink of old garbage and outhouse – or the new growth of balsam poplars – sweet honey with lemon. With your eyes closed as you soak in the morning sun, you can hear water drip from the roof of the ice cave undercut by the stream – a

children's bell choir, the random eagerness of the tinkling silver bells. With your eyes closed in the back of the bus, dusty and weary from the day, you can taste mountains pulverized by time. And what you do feel with your eyes closed? Maybe a thunderstorm receding, that deep, clean calm.

6. Carefully watch for what you cannot see.
   Some things cannot be seen because they are hidden: a falling fountain of northern lights, burnt out in the blaze of the sun. And some things cannot be seen because they are gone: the pregnant alpha female of the Grant Creek wolf pack, killed by a trapper at the boundary of the park. Some things cannot be seen because they are too fast: a merlin stooping on a vole. And some things cannot be seen because they are too slow: a mountain rising where North America scrapes under the bed of the sea.

7. Watch for motion. Watch for stillness.
   Like dragonflies, the first thing a human sees is motion. So watch for movement where you might expect stillness, and watch for stillness where you might expect movement. Often, the only difference between a bear and a boulder at a distance is that the bear will lift her head to make sure her cub has not strayed. Bears swing their giant heads through the wildflowers or lope along the riverbank. But when the willow withes are bent to the wind, the bears will hold their ground.

8. Watch for sameness, and watch for difference.
   Compare the color on the shoulders of a sow grizzly in sunshine, with the velvet on the antlers of a caribou bedded down on the beach, or the belly of an arctic warbler, or willow catkins backlit at dusk. How is it that light, usually so imaginative, returns again and again to this buttery glow? Contrast the growth pattern of aspen trees, the dusty yellow trunk dividing into branches into twigs into leaders and leaves, with the growth pattern of streams. Tiny rills in the shadows of snowfields join streams that join waterfalls that gather in rivers that flow through gravel plains to the one great sea. Why do trees endlessly divide, but rivers eternally gather?

9. Watch with your eyes in constant motion.
   Scan the landscape restlessly, the closest thickets to the far peaks. Constant motion is the trick of the veteran watcher. The highest resolution of the human eye is not in the center, but slightly off to the side. So trust the flickering glance more than the lingering stare. But don't stop there. Look toward the future, when the green leaves of poplars will float like yellow boats down the river as the first snow mounds on midstream rocks. And then look into the past. The purple hanging valleys and green tundra plains speak of the Pleistocene Epoch, when wooly mammoths wrapped their trunks around sedge clumps and stuffed them between their massive teeth.

10. Watch to wonder at the world.

What is this astonishing world, where northern anemones turn their faces to follow the sun, where a bear hums as she nurses her cub, where sunlight plays ice like a xylophone, where bees crawl down the throats of purple bells?

A good day of watching, this glad and grateful attention -- a scour of wind-driven rain, the surprise of a white mountain massif, the tundra that flowers to the edge of the known world – these remind watchers that there are interests that are not our own, there is beauty we did not create, there are depths of mystery we cannot fathom, there are wonders beyond words. This understanding may be what we are really watching for through rain running down the windows of the bus.

East Fork of the Toklat, Sunrise

For Stephen and Wendy, the 2013 artists-in-residence

The Art of Watching
Kathleen Dean Moore

Today, June 13th, the sun is scheduled to rise at 3:46 am, and I am here to meet it, sitting on a bench by the East Fork of the Toklat, looking upriver toward the snow-covered ridges of Mount Pendleton. This early in the morning, the braided riverbed, the mounded moraines, the rising peaks are printed on the Earth in shades of grey. Even the sky is grey. But there it is, right on time, the first spot of color, a pink brush stroke on the peak of the mountain. At first, that's all there is, the surprise of this pink mountaintop in a grey world. But soon enough, the sun daubs the same pink paint on the shoulders of the mountain and adds lavender strokes over the glacier and down the east ridge. Now there's cadmium yellow across the face of the snowfield and more pink on the talus slopes. Slowly, as the Earth rolls, the sun slathers pink down the angle of the ridge. Burnt umber dots the gravel slopes of the alluvial plain. This is not a watercolor wash. This is oil paint or gouache. These mountains are daubed and streaked in color as thick as van Gogh's.

But now, here is green, a big slathering of green along the tundra plains of the hills. Painstakingly, the sun applies permanent green in short strokes over the grey spruce forests and sap green over the grove of aspens. One by one, the cobbles in the broad riverbed take on all the colors of stone – ochre, black, silver, red – and now the reaching arms of the river and the sky itself are suddenly blue. Cerulean blue, applied on the river with the tip of the brush, and with wide strokes on the sky. The colors are rushing now, streaking toward me, splashing on the bars and rills, a flood of colors splattering across the stone. And here is my shadow, long and black in front of me, and I can feel the sun paint color across my neck and down the back of my sweater. I didn't know that blue was so warm, or that color would feel heavy as a hand on my shoulder.

Gratitude

for Denali

The Art of Watching

Kathleen Dean Moore

Deep and lasting thanks, to the gods, for ten days of clear blue skies and blazing sunshine – and for not letting us drive over the edge of Polychrome Pass. To the unseen wolf who left a trail of footprints in the mud in front of the cabin. To little Coal Creek, where we stripped down on a sweltering afternoon and poured ice water over our heads. To the magpie who called us outside to watch a red fox in the blue-bell field below the outhouse. To the caribou and the big blonde bear across the river. To the river itself and its sound of far-away applause. To the Dall sheep, up there eating flowers. To the little silver bell choir in the ice cave over a finger of the East Fork. To the whole mosh-pit of mosquitos, who made us clap and dance. To the astonishing Alaskan dusk-dawn, when the mountaintops shade from purple to pink and a new day begins.

To Cass Ray, patron saint of the eager visitor, and to all the people who steered us right and made a path for us – Charlotte and Barbara and Evan and Julia and Jonathan and Dan and Julie and Amanda and Monica and Matthew and Drew and Katherine and Cotton and Norm and Kris and the security guy who hopes to shoot a grizzly bear some day and the communications center people, because I loved telling them truly, twice a day, "Yes, all is well at the East Fork Cabin. All is well."

I came here with frayed nerves and a busted-up heart, after months of writing about climate catastrophe. I found the warning signs here too, of course – the hard heat, the spruce surging up the mountainside, the snowshoe hare that didn't quite get its pelage matched to the melting, the crackling lichens and the smell of smoke in the air. But I found something else too – the hope that comes from living inside the idea of a national park, which is a great experiment in human restraint and humility, a de-militarized zone that bars the violence of resource extraction and going-out-of-business sales, a place where we might finally learn if it is possible to be in the world without wrecking it.